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NEW MATERIALS

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The Child as Critic: Teaching Literature in the Elementary School, by Glenna Davis Sloan, Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 130 pps., 1975.

Teaching Literature: Designs for Cognitive Development, by Deborah Elkins, Merrill, 1976, 323 pps.

These two books present a refreshing view and some unique suggestions for developing children's thinking skills through the teaching of literature. Both books are specifically about the place of literature at the center of the language arts curriculum, and build compelling cases for the development of thinking skills and imagination through a cohesive, language centered curriculum. *The Child as Critic* is aimed at the elementary program, while *Teaching Literature* is directed at the adolescent student in the secondary school.

Dr. Sloan bases her thesis in *The Child as Critic* on ideas about teaching literature and the framework for criticism of literature as expressed by Northrup Frye, University of Toronto. She has skillfully integrated his theory into practical and creative suggestions related to the study and composition of poetry and story. However, this book is not just a "how-to—" book. Each suggestion is solidly grounded on the theory of children's needs and an overall conception of their growth toward "more fully developed human beings."

Dr. Sloan's view is in opposition to what she calls the "skills and drills" approach, and to fragmentation of the teaching of language arts. Rather, she calls for unification of children's learning around the study of literature in elementary school, involving all language arts. As she points out, "The literate person, however, is not one who *knows how* to read, but *one who reads*; fluently, responsively, critically, and because he wants to . . .

. . . In the drive toward literacy , we have splintered the subject 'English' into a number of discrete entities: reading, listening, speaking, writing, spelling, grammar—each with its own textbooks, drills, exercises, and timetable slots. Reading in particular has often been divorced from the rest of the 'language arts,' sometimes taught to children by teachers who teach them no other language activity. New knowledge from linguistics and literary criticism indicates the folly of this fragmented approach . . ."

Through the study of literature children can become critics, and in this

reference to literary criticism, Dr. Sloan reaches her main proposition. The structure of literature provides a deductive framework for the teacher. "The student is led toward these understandings inductively. With the deductive framework to guide him, the teacher structures learning sequences that give the child scope for asking questions, forming his own conclusions, and testing these against evidence." (p. 47) The student is helped to develop "educated imagination" which is the "constructive power of the mind."

In the chapters on the study of poetry and the story and composing poetry and story, the author presents many, many ideas developed around "learning sequences," which will be of use to the elementary teacher at all levels. These ideas and activities provide the bases for a comprehensive teaching program in the language arts.

Teaching Literature by Deborah Elkins is also a book of practical suggestions which is solidly grounded in theory. The book is directed toward the secondary school and is based on the work of Piaget. Since the secondary school is functionally divided into subject matter areas the author does not make the same argument for an integrated program as Sloan does. However, the effect of her suggestions appear to be very similar. The centrality of literature in the language arts program, systematically approached, will lead to the development of higher level cognitive skills in adolescent learners. She also views the ultimate goal to be the development of the fully functioning human who is sensitive to the human condition.

The discussion of Motivation and Cognition in the first chapter is cogent and should prove especially useful to the perceptive teacher. The chapters on "Teaching the Short Story," "Teaching the Novel," "Engaging in Drama," "Experiencing Poetry," and "Coping with the Essay and Exploring Biography" provide very thorough discussions and many useful ideas for the teacher.

These are both fascinating and important books and should provide many ideas which teachers at all levels can put into practice. Not all people will agree with the thesis each author proposes, but the emphasis on the development of higher order thinking skills is something all teachers must concern themselves with. They provide one more perspective in the growing awareness of the importance of language and thought in all of education.